

Reporting from Washington -- A massive spending bill expected to be approved by Congress this week is filled with more than 8,500 earmarks -- those pet projects that lawmakers love -- costing \$7.7 billion.

Despite the tough economy, mounting federal budget deficit and pledges by President Obama and members of both parties to crack down on the practice, a number of lawmakers have defended their earmarks as important to the nation's economic recovery.

And there's plenty in the bill for California: a DNA lab in Glendale, a new air traffic control tower for Palm Springs, police surveillance cameras for Rialto, a "green" jobs program in Berkeley and funding to help pay for new display space at the Autry National Center of the American West in Los Angeles.

"So much for the promise of change," Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a frequent critic of pork-barrel spending, said this week on the Senate floor.

But one man's pork is another man's economic stimulus.

Rep. Michael M. Honda (D-San Jose) said his earmarks would "not only spur job growth, innovation and economic development in my district but, importantly, reassure my constituents that their tax dollars are being efficiently and effectively returned to their communities in visible and meaningful ways."

Southern California projects include \$81.6 million for the Gold Line eastside extension, which will run from downtown to East Los Angeles, and \$1.8 million to help build a trench to speed trains traveling through the San Gabriel Valley and reduce the risks of collisions with cars and pedestrians.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Huntington Beach) called the \$95,000 he secured for a park project in his district crucial to the "economic viability of the beach as a tourist attraction."

A Compton project -- \$476,000 for the Tomorrow's Aeronautical Museum -- was singled out for criticism by Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), a self-described pork buster. "This earmark," he quipped in a news release, "is naut a good idea."

But a spokesman for Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), who pushed for the funding, said the nonprofit museum "serves underprivileged youth, educating them about aeronautics and even teaching them how to fly. It has received national honors as a groundbreaking, innovative program that helps achieve academic success. Educational programs like this one are a good use of public dollars."

The legislation, which has passed the House and which Democratic leaders hope will clear the Senate unchanged, also includes \$9.8 million for a Wilshire Boulevard rush-hour bus lane, \$500,000 to expand Los Angeles' mass notification system for emergencies and \$115,000 for "training the next generation of weather forecasters" at San Jose State University.

All but one of the California House Republicans who voted on the \$410-billion spending bill opposed it, even though it includes funding many sought for projects in their districts.

Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-Santa Clarita) called the bill "not the example of fiscal restraint that we need right now." Yet it includes McKeon earmarks such as \$333,000 to assist Henry Mayo Newhall Memorial Hospital in designing and building a helipad and \$167,000 for the Autry National Center of the American West to help pay for a new Southwest museum facility.

John L. Gray, chief executive and president of the Autry center, said the federal money would support "important work to save, restore and exhibit the largest Native American collection west of the Potomac. These funds will help employ people involved in this work, and are part of a diverse funding stream that includes private sector, foundation and other public sector sources."

Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-Redlands) declared: "I'm embarrassed by this omnibus spending bill." Yet the top Republican on the House Appropriations Committee secured more than \$18 million in earmarks. Jennifer Hing, a Lewis spokeswoman, said his earmarks "were one of the few things in the bill that he supported," but that he "opposed the levels of increases within the bill and what they mean for the taxpayers and for future budgets."

Rep. Mary Bono Mack of Palm Springs, the only California Republican to support the measure, said in a statement: "While legitimate concerns have been raised about the overall size of this spending package, there are simply too many vitally important priorities contained in this bill not to support it during these difficult economic times."

Among her projects: \$800,000 for the new air traffic control tower and \$1.3 million to add 612 acres to the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

Rep. George Radanovich (R-Mariposa) issued a statement on Feb. 4 declaring that he would forego earmarks. "Given the current state of our economy, a projected \$1-trillion deficit, and a Democrat majority and administration determined to spend another trillion dollars, I cannot in good conscience put the America people on the hook for more spending," he said.

Three weeks later, Radanovich submitted a statement to the congressional record listing nearly \$6.3 million in earmarks in the omnibus spending bill. A Radanovich spokesman said those projects were requested a year ago. The current legislation contains requests left over from last year for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1.

Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wis.), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, defended the earmarks, saying they had been scaled back.

Citing the scandal that put a former California congressman in jail, Obey told his colleagues during debate on the bill: "There are some people in this place who think that because Duke Cunningham fouled the nest with his corrupt practices that somehow we should eliminate all earmarks. . . . That's like saying because somebody gets drunk behind the wheel of a car you ought to abolish the automobile. The fact is, without the earmarking process, the White House

and its anonymous bureaucrats would make every single spending decision in government."

Obey was referring to Randy "Duke" Cunningham, the San Diego Republican who pleaded guilty to accepting at least \$2.4 million in bribes from defense contractors.

A number of Californians did forego earmarks in the spending bill, including Reps. Henry A. Waxman (D-Beverly Hills), John Campbell (R-Irvine) and Devin Nunes (R-Tulare). Waxman said he considered earmarks "out of control."

"Too many of them are generated by lobbyists here in Washington," he said, adding that he would prefer that agencies with expertise on proposed projects make the funding decisions.

A \$200,000 earmark sought by Rep. Howard L. Berman (D-Valley Village) for a tattoo removal program in his district has drawn scrutiny -- to the surprise of Berman's staff, who said the money would go to an anti-gang program that has won praise from law enforcement.

"It's not like a lobbyist asked us for this," said Berman spokeswoman Gene Smith.

The program is run by a nun.